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ABSTRACT

Although many studies have examined the competencies associated with being well-liked by the peer group, far less is known about the competencies children need in order to make and maintain good quality friendships. This study addressed friendship tasks, investigating 5 of 10 previously hypothesized competencies necessary to make and maintain good friendships: managing disagreements, being a reliable partner, dealing with multiple friendships and issues of exclusivity, helping when a friend is in need, and maintaining reciprocity or a spirit of equality in the friendship. Fourth- and fifth-grade children were presented with 6 hypothetical situations representing each of the 5 tasks, for a total of 30 hypothetical situations. Children's strategies, or what children said they would do in response to each situation, were assessed, as were children's goals, or what they said they would be trying to accomplish. The research attempted to answer: (1) if there is a relation between the goals children endorse and the behavioral strategies they select; (2) whether the strategies and goals are predictive of their friendship adjustment; and (3) whether boys and girls differ in types of strategies and goals. Results showed that the goals children chose were consistently related to the strategies they chose, that none of the adopted strategies or goals predicted Positive Friendship Quality after accounting for gender and peer acceptance (but were predictive of how conflicting children were rated by their best friend), and that there were gender differences for 11 of the 12 strategies and goals, with girls endorsing the accommodating and compromising strategies and the relationship and moral goals more than boys. (Contains 33 references.) (EV)

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Children's Goals and Strategies in Response to Conflicts Within a Friendship

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Children's Goals and Strategies in Response to Conflicts Within a Friendship

An important distinction in peer relations research is the distinction between being well-accepted and having good friendships (Asher & Hymel, 1981; Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; Parker & Asher, 1993a; Renshaw & Brown, 1993). Although many studies have examined the competencies associated with being well-liked by the peer group (see Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990, for a review), far less is known about the competencies children need in order to make and maintain good quality friendships. Considering the important benefits for children of having a friend and the costs of being friendless (see Asher & Parker, 1989; Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996; Furman & Robbins, 1985; Hartup & Sancillio, 1986; Sullivan, 1953), not knowing more about the competencies related to friendship adjustment is a significant gap in our knowledge about children's peer relationships.

Because we were interested in the competencies required specifically for being successful in friendships, the social tasks that this study addressed were friendship tasks. Asher, Parker, and Walker (1996) have proposed ten different social tasks which they hypothesized that children need to be able to handle well in order to make and maintain good friendships. In our study, we focused on five of these tasks. The five tasks were: managing disagreements, being a reliable partner, dealing with multiple friendships and issues of exclusivity, helping when a friend is in need, and maintaining reciprocity or a "spirit of equality" in the friendship. These five tasks have a common element in that they each potentially involve a conflict of interests between a child meeting the child's own needs and meeting the needs of the friend or relationship. For some of these tasks, the potential conflict of interests is very clear. For instance, in managing a disagreement over a valued object the child is faced with a conflict between meeting his or her own needs by trying to get the object and meeting the needs of the friend who also wants the object. In other tasks, such as helping a friend who is in need, the conflict of interest may not be as

apparent. A conflict of interest could arise in this task, however, if the friend wants help but there is something more enjoyable the child wants to do. Likewise, in the reliable partner task, a conflict could arise if the child has plans to spend time with the friend, but then receives an invitation to a different activity by a different friend. In each of these situations, the conflict is relatively mild. They are not major acts of aggression or betrayal, but rather normative disagreements which occur in close relationships.

In our study, fourth- and fifth-grade children were presented with six hypothetical situations representing each of the five tasks, resulting in a total of thirty hypothetical situations. Table 1 shows an example of a hypothetical situation representing the task of maintaining reciprocity or the "spirit of equality" in the friendship.

In assessing children's responses to these friendship tasks, we assessed children's strategies, that is what children said they would do in response to each situation. We also assessed children's goals, this is what children said they would be trying to accomplish in each situation. Because social situations are very complex and somewhat ambiguous, there are many possible goals a person could pursue in a given social situation. In a conflict of interest situation with a friend, for instance, some children might focus on the goal of maintaining the friendship in the face of the conflict. Other children might adopt an instrumental goal and simply be trying to get their own needs met. Still other children might even adopt a retaliation goal and try to get back at the friend who appears to be opposing their interests. If it is correct that goals motivate and guide behavior (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Gollwitzer & Bargh, 1996; Parkhurst & Asher, 1985; Renshaw & Asher, 1983; Taylor & Asher, 1984), then the multitude of possible goals in a social situation would result in large individual differences observed in social behavior.

In this presentation, we will address three research questions. The first is whether there is a relation between the goals children endorse in these situations and the behavioral strategies they select. The second question addressed is whether the strategies and goals

children endorse in these situations are predictive of their friendship adjustment after statistically accounting for children's level of acceptance. The third question is whether boys and girls differ in the types of strategies and goals they endorse.

We assessed children's strategies and goals in response to friendship conflict by presenting them with either six strategy options or six goal options after each hypothetical situation. The six strategy options were the accommodating strategy, the compromising strategy, the verbally aggressive strategy, the self-interest pursuit strategy, the leaving strategy, and the threat of termination of friendship strategy (see Table 2). In a separate session, children were given the same thirty hypothetical situations, but this time they were presented with six goal options. The six goal options were the relationship goal, the moral goal, the tension reduction goal, the instrumental goal, the control goal, and the retaliation goal (see Table 3).

Table 4 shows an example item from the strategy questionnaire, including the hypothetical situation and the six strategy options. The same hypothetical situation also appeared in the goal questionnaire, but rather than asking, "What would you say or do?" after the hypothetical situation, the question after the hypothetical situation in the goal questionnaire was, "What would your goal be?" The six goal choices were then listed after the hypothetical situation rather than the six strategy choices. For each strategy or each goal, children rated on a 5-point scale how likely they would be to adopt that particular strategy or goal. This method has been used in previous research (Chung & Asher, 1995; Erdley & Asher, 1996) and has been found to result in much higher reliability than a method which allows a child to produce or select only one response (Chung & Asher, 1996; Rabiner & Gordon, 1992).

Cronbach alphas were calculated for each strategy and goal across the five friendship tasks (i.e., across all thirty hypothetical situations). Because the five friendships tasks contained the common element of involving a conflict of interests, we hypothesized that the strategy and the goal scores could be assessed across the five tasks without losing

substantive information, and preliminary analyses supported this hypothesis. In fact, children's ratings of the same strategy or goal in different tasks were generally highly correlated (M = .74). Also, the reliability of a strategy or goal score calculated for six hypothetical situations chosen randomly across the five tasks (with the constraint that there was at least one hypothetical situation representing each of the five tasks) was generally comparable to the reliability of a strategy score or goal score calculated for the six hypothetical situations within a task. Table 5 presents the internal reliabilities for each strategy and goal score. As can be seen, they were very high.

The first of the three research questions involves examining the relationship between children's goals and strategies in these conflict of interests situations. Children were given a score for each goal and strategy based on the average rating they gave to that goal or strategy across all thirty hypothetical situations. Then correlations were calculated between each of the goals and each of the strategies.

The goals children chose in friendship conflict situations were consistently related to the strategies they chose. In fact, thirty-two of the thirty-six possible goal with strategy correlations were statistically significant. As an example, Table 6 presents the strategy correlates of the relationship goal and the retaliation goal. The relationship goal correlated significantly and positively with the accommodating and compromising strategies while correlating significantly and negatively with the verbally aggressive, self-interest pursuit, leaving, and friendship termination strategies. In contrast, the retaliation goal correlated significantly and negatively with the accommodating and compromising strategies while correlating significantly and positively with the verbally aggressive, self-interest pursuit, leaving, and friendship termination strategies. These findings fit nicely with an emerging body of literature finding that children's social goals are related to their social strategies in specific social situations (Chung & Asher, 1995, 1996; Erdley & Asher, 1996; Lochman, Wayland, & White, 1993; Slaby & Guerra, 1988)

Our second research question addresses whether children's goals and strategies predict friendship adjustment. In assessing children's friendship adjustment, we considered both how many best friends children had and also what the quality of their best friendship was like. We used multiple indexes of friendship adjustment because of the growing consensus that friendship adjustment is not a unitary construct (Hartup, 1996; Parker & Asher, 1993a).

The number of best friends children had was determined using a limited friendship nominations procedure. Specifically, children were given a class roster and asked to circle the names of their three best friends. Children were considered to have a reciprocal best friend if a child they nominated also nominated them. Using this procedure a child could have between 0 and 3 best friends.

We assessed friendship quality using a revision of Parker and Asher's (1993b) Friendship Quality Questionnaire. The best friend of each of our subjects rated that friend on forty items, however, rather than sub-grouping the forty items into the six friendship qualities identified in the original Friendship Quality Questionnaire, we grouped the forty items using two broad-band friendship qualities based on an exploratory factor analysis (see Table 7). These two broad-bands were Positive Friendship Quality and Friendship Conflict. Illustrative items from the Positive Friendship Quality scale were, "[friend's name] always gets together with me after school and on weekends" and "[friend's name] cares about my feelings." Illustrative items from the Friendship Conflict scale were, "[friend's name] argues with me a lot" and "[friend's name] bugs me."

In the analyses examining the relationship between children's strategies and goals and their friendship adjustment, we controlled for the children's level of peer acceptance. To assess acceptance, children were given a class roster and were asked to rate each of their classmates on a 5-point scale in terms of how much they liked to play with that classmate. Children were given acceptance scores based on the average ratings they received from their classmates; these scores were standardized within classroom and gender.

In order to determine if children's strategies and goals predicted to their friendship adjustment, we performed a large set of separate multiple regression analyses. For each of the three friendship outcomes (number of best friends, Positive Friendship Quality, and Friendship Conflict), we performed a regression analysis for each strategy and for each goal. Given six strategies and six goals and three separate friendship outcomes, this meant that thirty-six separate regression analyses were performed. In each of the regression equations predicting to a friendship outcome, we first entered gender, then acceptance, and then the gender x acceptance interaction term. Lastly, we entered one of the strategies or one of the goals. This order of entry was chosen so that we could determine what effect a strategy or goal had on a friendship outcome after statistically accounting for any overlap between acceptance or gender and the friendship outcome. This means, that if a relationship is found between a strategy and a friendship outcome, the relationship cannot be due to the fact that better-accepted children are using the strategy and better-accepted children also have better friendship adjustment.

Table 8 shows the results of these analyses in terms of the change in R^2, the betas, and the F statistics. As can be seen, the strategies and goals children endorsed in friendship conflict situations were found to be predictive of the number of best friends they had. After accounting for gender and acceptance, compromising strategies were associated with having a greater number of best friends, whereas verbally aggressive, leaving, and friendship termination strategies were associated with having fewer best friends. The retaliation goal was the only goal to predict to the number of best friends. Having this hostile goal of trying to get back at a friend in a relatively mild conflict situation was predictive of having fewer friends.

In terms of friendship quality, none of the strategies or goals adopted in the conflict of interests situations predicted to Positive Friendship Quality, after accounting for gender and acceptance. Children's strategies and goals were, however, predictive of how conflictual they were rated to be by their best friend. Compromising strategies were

tasks, such as being a good listener or being validating to a friend's ideas, would be predictive of the positive emotional qualities of a friendship but not of the level of conflict in the friendship.

Our third and final research question in this paper is whether there are gender differences in the strategies and goals children endorse in friendship conflict situations. Results indicated that there were gender differences for eleven of the twelve strategies and goals. In terms of strategies, girls endorsed the accommodating and compromising strategies more strongly than boys, whereas boys endorsed the verbally aggressive, self-interest pursuit, leaving, and friendship termination strategies more strongly than girls (see Figure 1). For goals, girls endorsed the relationship goal and the moral goal more strongly than boys, whereas boys endorsed the instrumental, control, and retaliation goals more strongly than girls (see Figure 2). There was no gender difference for the tension reduction goal .

These results could be taken to mean that girls are more skilled in their friendships. We might, therefore, expect that girls would be more satisfied with their friendships than boys. In earlier research, however, boys have reported as much satisfaction with their best friendships as girls (Parker & Asher, 1993b). The friendship tasks we studied seem to be areas of strength for girls. Yet the earlier research on friendship satisfaction suggests that there may be certain friendship tasks for which boys bring particular skills or strengths. For instance, boys might excel at initiating activities outside of school with a friend, or they might excel at being a "fun" and exciting companion (the first two tasks identified by Asher et al., 1996).

The findings of this study have implications for intervening with children with peer relationship difficulties. Although social skills training studies indicate that many children become better accepted by their peers (e.g., Bierman & Furman, 1984; Coie & Krehbiel, 1984; Gresham & Nagle, 1980; Ladd, 1981; Lochman, Coie, Underwood, & Terry, 1993; Oden & Asher, 1977), these same studies have not yet demonstrated that children make

gains in friendship. The present research suggests that focusing on conflicts of interest within a friendship would be useful and that attention should be given to children's goals as well as their strategies in friendship tasks. Most of all, the results imply that helping children to move away from retaliation goals may be a necessary element of successful intervention for some children.

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Table 1

Example Hypothetical Situation from the Maintaining Reciprocity ("Spirit of Equality") Task

---

You and your friend always go to the movies on Saturday. You take turns picking which movie to see. You picked the movie last week. This week there is another movie you really want to see, but your friend says it's her turn to pick.

Table 2

Definition and Example for Each Strategy

Strategy	Definition and Example
Accommodating	Engaging in an action which satisfies the interests of one's friend at the expense of one's own interests (e.g., "I would tell my friend that he can pick the movie.")
Compromising	Engaging in an action which satisfies both one's own interests and one's friend's interests (e.g., "I would say that I would go to his movie this time if I could pick the movie next time.")
Verbally Aggressive	Statement by the focal child which has a high probability of hurting the friend's feelings (e.g., "I would tell him to shut up because I want to pick.")
Self-Interest Pursuit	Engaging in an action which satisfies one's own interests at the expense of one's friend's interests (e.g., "I would tell my friend that we should go to the movie I want to see.")
Leaving	Physically leaving the situation (e.g., "I would just go away.")
Threat of Termination of Friendship	Verbally threatening to terminate the friendship if the friend does not comply with the wishes of the focal child (e.g., "I would tell my friend that I won't be friends with him unless we go to the movie that I want to see.")

Table 3

Scale Wording for Each Goal

Goal	Scale Wording
Relationship Goal	"I would be trying to stay friends."
Moral Goal	"I would be trying to be fair."
Tension Reduction Goal	"I would be trying to keep myself from getting upset."
Instrumental Goal	"I would be trying to _____." (e.g., "I would be trying to go to the movie I want to see.")
Control Goal	"I would be trying to keep my friend from pushing me around."
Retaliation Goal	"I would be trying to get back at my friend."

Table 4

Example Item

You and your friend always go to the movies on Saturday. You take turns picking which movie to see. You picked the movie last week. This week there is another movie you really want to see, but your friend says it's his turn to pick. What would you say or do?

	definitely would not do				definitely would do
A. I would tell my friend that I would go to his movie this time if I could pick the movie next time.	1	2	3	4	5
B. I would tell my friend that I won't be friends with him unless we go to the movie that I want to see.	1	2	3	4	5
C. I would tell my friend that he can pick the movie.	1	2	3	4	5
D. I would tell my friend to shut up because I want to pick.	1	2	3	4	5
E. I would tell my friend that we should go to the movie I want to see.	1	2	3	4	5
F. I would just go away.	1	2	3	4	5

Table 6

Correlations Between the Relationship and Retaliation Goals and Each Strategy

	Strategy					
	Accommodating	Compromising	Verbally Aggressive	Self-Interst Pursuit	Leaving	Friendship Termination
Relationship	.43****	.36****	-.37****	-.27****	-.29****	-.37****
Retaliation	-.29****	-.27****	.50****	.45****	.47****	.54****

****$p < .0001$

Table 7

Loadings and Cross-Loadings of the Friendship Quality Questionnaire Items on Two Factors

Item	Loading Factor 1	Loading Factor 2
Positive Friendship Quality		
Conflict Resolution		
1. Talks about how to get over being mad at each other	.66	-.16
2. Easy to make up with when we have a fight	.49	-.18
3. Gets over arguments really quickly	.38	-.22
Help and Guidance		
1. Shares things	.77	.04
2. Helps me so I can get done quicker	.77	.08
3. Loans things all the time	.76	.22
4. Gives help and advise with figuring things out	.74	-.01
5. Does special favors	.71	.07
6. Can count on for good ideas about how to get things done	.67	-.16
7. Helps me with schoolwork a lot	.67	.12
8. Helps with chores or other things a lot	.65	.05
9. Comes up with good ideas on ways to do things	.65	-.18
Companionship and Recreation		
1. Always plays with me at recess	.55	.04
2. Always picks me to be a partner	.50	.03
3. Always sits next to me at lunch	.48	.07
4. Gets together with me after school and on weekends	.47	.13
5. Is fun to do things with	.40	-.32
Intimate Exchange		
1. Tell him/her about private things a lot	.77	.12
2. Tells me secrets	.77	.29
3. Talks to me about things that make him/her sad	.71	.12
4. Talks with me about how to make ourselves feel better if we are mad at each other	.71	-.04
5. Can tell my problems to	.63	-.20
6. Can talk to when mad about something that happened	.63	-.26

(table continues)

Item	Loading Factor 1	Loading Factor 2
Validation and Caring		
1. Sticks up for me if others talk behind my back	.70	-.03
2. Makes me feel good about my ideas	.66	-.15
3. Cares about my feelings	.64	-.12
4. Tells me I am good at things	.62	-.06
5. Tells me I am pretty smart	.60	-.09
6. Can count on for good ideas about games to play	.59	-.18
7. Makes me feel important and special	.54	-.31
8. Says I'm sorry if he/she hurts my feelings	.52	-.32
9. Would like me even if others didn't	.47	-.28
10. Does not tell others my secrets	.40	-.41
Friendship Conflict		
Conflict and Betrayal		
1. Fights with me	.13	.79
2. Bugs me	.06	.79
3. Makes me mad	.09	.68
4. Argues with me a lot	.16	.64
5. Doesn't listen to me	.03	.58
6. Sometimes says mean things about me to other kids	.07	.56
7. Can count on to keep promises	.44	-.02

Table 8

Summary of Hierarchical Regressions of Strategies and Goals on Number of Best Friends, Positive Friendship Quality, and Friendship Conflict

	Number of Best Friends			Positive Friendship Quality			Friendship Conflict		
	R^2 change[a]	B	F	R^2 change[a]	B	F	R^2 change[a]	B	F
Strategies									
Accommodating	.00	.01	.07	.00	.01	.03	.00	-.09	1.62
Compromising	.01	.14	7.41**	.00	.03	.27	.02	-.18	6.40*
Verbally Aggressive	.01	-.10	8.01**	.00	.03	.42	.06	.22	22.72****
Self-Interest Pursuit	.00	.01	.04	.00	.01	.01	.05	.25	17.11****
Leaving	.01	-.10	4.96*	.00	.01	.01	.03	.20	9.75**
Friendship Termination	.01	-.12	7.65**	.00	-.01	.02	.05	.27	20.07****
Goals									
Relationship	.00	.06	2.17	.00	.06	1.41	.01	-.11	4.63*
Moral	.00	.03	.00	.00	.06	1.54	.00	-.05	.95
Tension Reduction	.00	.06	2.98	.01	.06	2.23	.00	-.01	.06
Instrumental	.00	-.00	.54	.00	-.01	.07	.03	.17	9.81**
Control	.00	-.04	2.15	.00	-.03	.57	.02	.10	7.75**
Retaliation	.02	-.14	16.97****	.01	-.09	3.44	.08	.28	31.03****

[a]after controlling for gender, acceptance, and the gender x acceptance interaction in the regression equation

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$. ****$p < .0001$.

Figure 1

Gender Differences in Children's Strategies

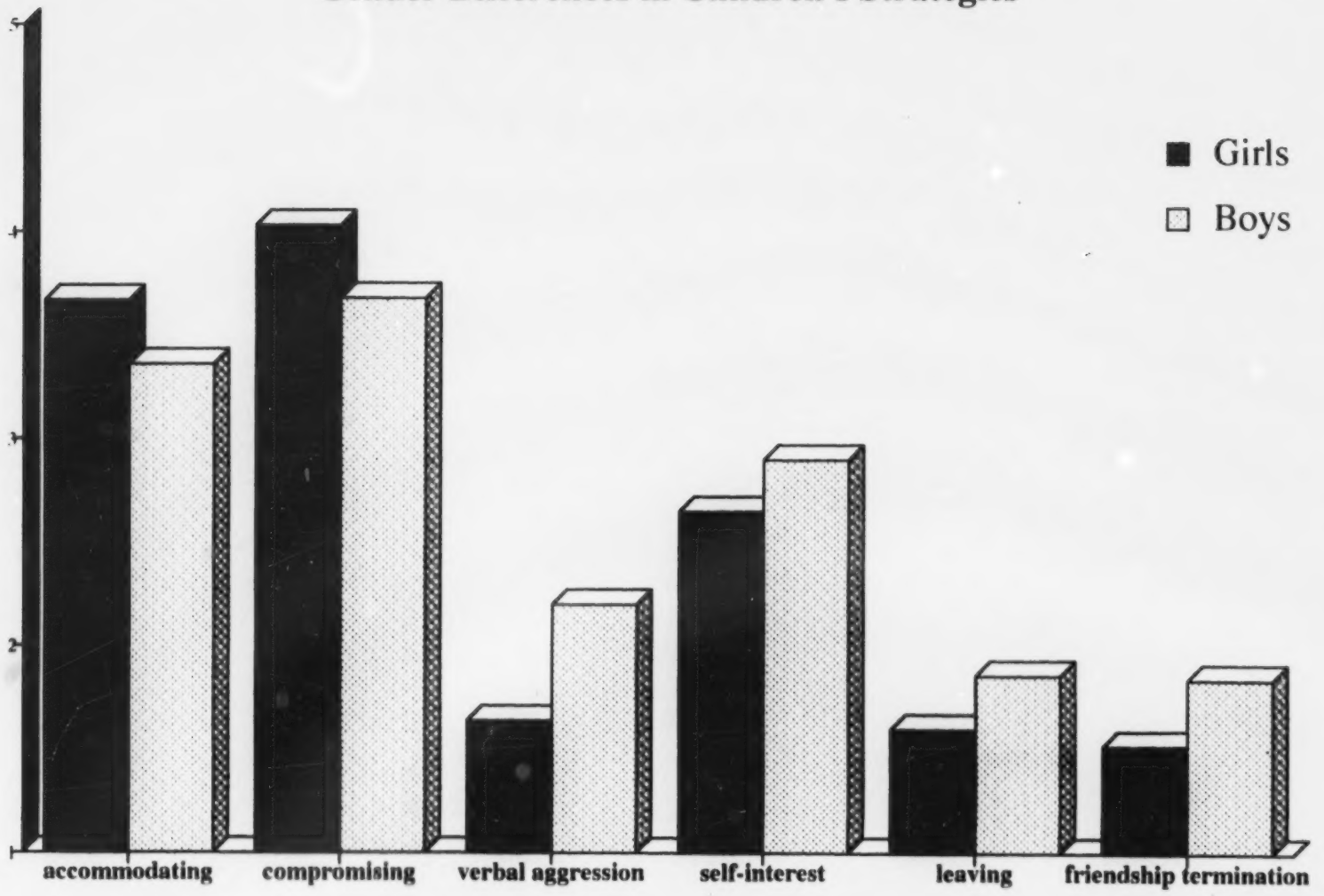

Figure 2

Gender Differences in Children's Goals